

NOTES ON CANONIZATION

THE QUESTION AS TO WHETHER THE NEW TESTAMENT QUOTES FROM THE SEPTUAGINT

From a Bible-honoring point of view and taking the position that there was a pre-Christian era Septuagint, Terence Brown says, "At the time of our Lord's earthly ministry, it was the universal practice of Greek-speaking Jews throughout the whole of the Middle East to read in their synagogues and to quote in their discussions the Old Testament Scriptures in this Greek Version.

It is agreed that the Septuagint was far from perfect, and no claim can be advanced for the divine inspiration of the translators. However, if we observe the manner in which the Apostles refer to the Old Testament Scriptures, we see a striking indication of the inspiration under which they themselves wrote. When they refer to the Septuagint, they do so under the supernatural guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Divine Author of the original revelation. Authority is therefore higher than that of a translator.

This higher authority is shown in three ways. Firstly, where the LXX translators were correct, the Apostles quote verbally and literally from the Septuagint, and thus remind their readers of the Scriptures with which they were already familiar in that particular form. Secondly, where the LXX is incorrect, the Apostles amend it, and make their quotations according to the Hebrew, translating it anew into Greek, and improving upon the defective rendering.

Thirdly, when it was the purpose of the Holy Spirit to point out more clearly in what sense the quotations from the Old Testament Scriptures were to be understood, the Apostles were guided to restate the revealed truth more fully or explicitly. By the hands of the Apostles, the Holy Spirit thus delivers again His own inspired message, in order to make more clear to later generations what had been formerly declared through the prophets in earlier age. By giving again the old truth in new words, the Holy Ghost infallibly imparted teaching which lay hidden in the old, but which could only be fully understood by a later generation if given

in a different form.

There are about 263 direct quotations from the Old Testament in the New, and of these only 88 correspond closely to the Septuagint. A further 64 are used with some variations, 37 have the same meaning expressed in different words, 16 agree more closely with the Hebrew, and 20 differ both from the Hebrew and the Septuagint. (Note, this tabulation adds up to only 225). From this it is evident that the Holy Spirit exercises independence of all human versions when He guides His Apostles to quote in the New Testament that which He had caused to be written in the Old. The Lord Jesus Christ, being One in Divine power and glory with the Eternal Father and Eternal Spirit, demonstrated the same independence, and exercised the same authority."

1. D. A. Waite (also from a Bible-honoring point of view) is prepared to question whether there was a pre-Christian era Septuagint and says, "'There are various references in the New Testament which would show that the Lord Jesus referred to the Hebrew OT rather than to the Greek Septuagint or other versions.
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The Masoretic text refers to the traditionally accepted Hebrew text. The word Masoretic means traditional.)

Matthew 24:35 *Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away.*

2. THE FORMATION OF THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON

After the New Testament books had been written, the next step in the divine program for the New Testament Scriptures was the gathering of these individual books into one New Testament canon in order that thus they might take their place beside the books of the Old Testament canon as the concluding portion of His holy Word. Let us now consider how this was accomplished under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

The first New Testament books to be assembled together were the Epistles of Paul. The Apostle Peter, shortly before he died, referred to

Paul's Epistles as Scripture and in such a way as to indicate that at least the beginning of such a collection had already been made (II Peter 3:15-16). Even radical scholars, such as L. J. Goodspeed (1926), agree that a collection of Paul's Epistles was in circulation at the beginning of the second century and that Ignatius (117) referred to it. When the Four Gospels were collected together is unknown, but it is generally agreed that this must have taken place before 170 AD because at that time Tatian made his harmony of the Gospels (Diatessaron), which included all four of the canonical Gospels and only these four. Before 200 AD Paul, the Gospels, Acts, I Peter and I John were recognized as Scripture by Christians everywhere (as the writings of Irenaeus, Clement of

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Alexandria, and Tertullian prove) and accorded an authority equal to that of the Old Testament Scriptures. It was Tertullian, moreover, who first applied the name New Testament to this collection of apostolic writings.

The seven remaining books, 2 and 3 John, 2 Peter, Hebrews, James, Jude and Revelation, were not yet unanimously accepted as Scripture. By the time the fourth century had arrived, however, few Christians seem to have questioned the right of these disputed books to a place in the New Testament canon. Eminent Church Fathers of that era, such as Athanasius, Augustine, and Jerome, include them in their lists of the New Testament books. Thus through the Holy Spirit's guidance of individual believers, silently and gradually - but nevertheless surely, the Church as a whole was led to a recognition of the fact that the twenty-seven books of the New Testament, and only these books, form the canon which God gave to be placed beside the Old Testament Scriptures as the authoritative and final revelation of His will.

This guidance of the Holy Spirit was negative as well as positive. It involved not only the selection of canonical New Testament books but also the rejection of all non-canonical books which were mistakenly regarded as canonical by some of the early Christians. Thus the Shepherd of Hermas was used as holy Scripture by Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria, and the same status was wrongly given to the Teaching of the Twelve Apostles by Clement and Origen. Clement likewise commented on the Apocalypse of Peter and the Epistle of Barnabas, to which Origen also accorded the title "catholic." And in addition, there were many false Gospels in circulation, as well as numerous false Acts ascribed to various Apostles. But although some of those non-canonical writings gained temporary acceptance in certain quarters, this state of affairs lasted for but a short time. Soon all Christians everywhere were led by the Holy Spirit to repudiate

these spurious works and to receive only the canonical books as their New Testament Scriptures.

Having said all this, it must also be acknowledged that there is a deep and sacred mystery in the formation of the Written Word on Earth just as there had been in the incarnation and development of the Living Word (My comment).

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The period of fixation (A.D. 367-405)

St. Athanasius

While the influence of [Athanasius](#) on the [Canon of the Old Testament](#) was negative and exclusive (see *supra*), in that of the [New Testament](#) it was trenchantly constructive. In his "Epistola Festalis" (A.D. 367) the illustrious [Bishop](#) of [Alexandria](#) ranks all of [Origen's New Testament](#) Antilegomena, which are identical with the deuteros, boldly inside the Canon, without noticing any of the scruples about them. Thenceforward they were formally and firmly fixed in the Alexandrian Canon. And it is significant of the general trend of [ecclesiastical](#) authority that not only were works which formerly enjoyed high standing at broad-minded Alexandria--the [Apocalypse of](#)

[Peter](#) and the [Acts of Paul](#)--involved by [Athanasius](#) with the apocrypha, but even some that [Origen](#) had regarded as [inspired](#)--[Barnabas](#), the [Shepherd of Hermas](#), the [Didache](#)--were ruthlessly shut out under the same damnatory title.

[Clement of Alexandria](#) was the first to apply the word "Testament" to the sacred [library](#) of the New Dispensation.

3. THE PRESERVATION OF THE NEW TESTAMENT TEXT

A further step in the providential preservation of the New Testament was the printing of it in 1516 and the dissemination of it throughout the whole of Western Europe during the Protestant Reformation. In the first printing of the Greek New Testament we see God's preserving providence working hiddenly and, to the outward eye, accidentally. The editor, Erasmus, performed his task in great haste in order to meet the deadline set by the printer, Froben of Basle. Hence this first edition contained a number of errors of a minor sort, some of which persisted in later editions. But in all essentials the New Testament text first printed by Erasmus and later by Stephanus (1550) and Elzevir (1633) is in full agreement with the Traditional Text providentially preserved in the vast majority of the Greek New Testament manuscripts.

This printed text is commonly called the Textus Receptus (Received Text). It is the text which was used by the Protestant Reformers during the Reformation and by all Protestants everywhere for three hundred years thereafter. It was from this Textus Receptus that the King James Version and the other classic Protestant translations were made. In the Textus Receptus God provided a trustworthy printed New Testament text for the Protestant Reformers and for all believing Christians down to the present day. Thus the printing of it was, after all, no accident but the work of God's special providence.

With some 85% or more of the 5000 extant MSS falling into the category of the Received Text, there is in fact only one textual family the Received. All that remains is so contradictory, so confused, so mixed, that not by the furthest stretch of imagination can they be considered several families of MSS.

But evidence will presently be given that from days touching on those of the last Apostles there were two well defined bodies of sacred writings of the [New Testament](#), which constituted the firm, irreducible, universal minimum, and the nucleus of its complete Canon: these were the [Four Gospels](#), as the [Church](#) now has them, and thirteen [Epistles](#) of [St. Paul](#)--the *Evangelium* and the *Apostolicum*.

that books current under an Apostle's name in the Early Church, such as the Epistle of Barnabas and the Apocalypse of St. Peter, were nevertheless excluded from canonical rank,

In fact, for the earliest [Christians](#) the Gospel of [Christ](#), in the wide sense above noted, was not to be classified with, because transcending, the [Old Testament](#). It was not until about the middle of the second century that under the [rubric](#) of *Scripture* the [New Testament](#) writings were assimilated to the Old; the authority of the [New Testament](#) as the Word preceded and produced its authority as a New Scripture.

HISTORICAL CONFIRMATION OF NT CANON

[Irenæus](#), in his work "Against Heresies" (A.D. 182-88), testifies to the existence of a *Tetramorph*, or Quadriform Gospel,

The saintly Doctor of [Lyons](#) explicitly states the names of the four Elements of this Gospel, and repeatedly cites all the [Evangelists](#) in a manner parallel to his citations from the [Old Testament](#).

From the testimony of [St. Irenæus](#) alone there can be no reasonable [doubt](#) that the Canon of the Gospel was inalterably fixed in the [Catholic Church](#) by the last quarter of the second century.

Justin Martyr quotes from the Synoptic Gospels.

St. Ignatius, [Bishop](#) of [Antioch](#), and [St. Polycarp](#), of [Smyrna](#), had been disciples of Apostles; they wrote their epistles in the first decade of the second century (100-110). They employ Matthew, Luke, and John. In St. Ignatius we find the first instance of the [consecrated](#) term "it is written" applied to a Gospel (Ad Philad., viii, 2). Both these [Fathers](#) show not only a personal acquaintance with "the Gospel" and the thirteen Pauline Epistles,

St. Clement, [Bishop of Rome](#), and disciple of [St. Paul](#), addressed his Letter to the Corinthian Church c. A.D. 97, and, although it cites no [Evangelist](#) explicitly, this epistle contains combinations of texts taken from the three [synoptic Gospels](#), especially from St. Matthew. That Clement does not allude to the [Fourth Gospel](#) is quite natural, as it was not composed till about that time.

[St. Irenæus](#), employs all the Pauline writings, except the short Philemon, as sacred and canonical.

The testimony of [Polycarp](#) and Ignatius is again capital in this case. Eight of [St. Paul's](#) writings are cited by [Polycarp](#); [St. Ignatius of](#)

[Antioch](#) ranked the Apostles above the Prophets, and must therefore have allowed the written compositions of the former at least an equal rank with those of the latter ("Ad Philadelphios", v). [St. Clement of Rome](#) refers to

HEBREWS

The remaining books

In this formative period the Epistle to the Hebrews did not obtain a firm footing in the Canon of the Universal Church.

Thus Hebrews, James, Jude, and II Peter remained hovering outside the precincts of universal canonicity, and the controversy about them and the subsequently disputed Apocalypse form the larger part of the remaining history of the Canon of the New Testament.

CANONS

The Muratorian Canon, contemporary with [Irenæus](#), gives the complete list of the thirteen, which, it should be remembered, does not include Hebrews.

In the first class, the *Homologoumena*, stood the Gospels, the thirteen Pauline Epistles, Acts, Apocalypse, I Peter, and I John. The contested writings were Hebrews, II Peter, II and III John, James, Jude, Barnabas, the Shepherd of Hermas, the [Didache](#), and probably the Gospel of the Hebrews. Personally, [Origen](#) accepted all of these as Divinely inspired, though viewing contrary opinions with toleration. [Origen's](#) authority seems to have given to Hebrews and the disputed [Catholic Epistles](#) a firm place in the Alexandrian Canon, their tenure there having been previously insecure, judging from the [exegetical](#) work of Clement, and the list in the Codex Claromontanus, which is assigned by competent scholars to an early Alexandrian origin.

[Luther](#), basing his action on dogmatic reasons and the judgment of antiquity, had discarded Hebrews, James, Jude, and Apocalypse as altogether uncanonical. [Zwingli](#) could not see in Apocalypse a Biblical book.

Thus the Codex Sinaiticus included the 'Epistle of Barnabas' and the Shepherd of Hermas, a Roman work of about AD 110 or earlier, while the Codex Alexandrinus included the writings known as the First and Second Epistles of Clement; and the inclusion of these works alongside the biblical writings probably indicates that they were

accorded some degree of canonical status.

Another early list, also of Roman provenance, dated about the end of the second century, is that commonly called the 'Muratorian Fragment,' because it was first published in Italy in 1740 by the antiquarian Cardinal L. A. Muratori. It is unfortunately mutilated at the beginning, but it evidently mentioned Matthew and Mark, because it refers to Luke as the third Gospel; then it mentions John, Acts, 'Paul's nine letters to churches and four to individuals (Philemon, Titus, 1 and 2 Timothy), Jude, two Epistles of John, and the Apocalypse of John and that of Peter.' The Shepherd of Hermas is mentioned as worthy to be read (i.e. in church) but not to be included in the number of prophetic or apostolic writings.

About AD 115 Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, refers to 'The Gospel' as an authoritative writing, and as he knew more than one of the four 'Gospels' it may well be that by 'The Gospel' he means the fourfold collection which went by that name.

- 1) By the time of Irenaeus, who, though a native of Asia Minor, was bishop of Lyons in Gaul about AD 180, the idea of a fourfold Gospel had become so axiomatic in the Church at large that he can refer to it as an established and recognised fact as obvious as the four cardinal points of the compass or the four winds:
3. For as there are four quarters of the world in which we live, and four universal winds, and as the Church is dispersed over all the earth, and the gospel is the pillar and base of the Church and the breath of life, so it is natural that it should have four pillars, breathing immortality from every quarter and kindling the life of men anew. Whence it is manifest that the Word, the architect of all things, who sits upon the cherubim and holds all things together, having been manifested to men, has given us the gospel in fourfold form, but held together by one Spirit.

Eusebius (c. 265-340) mentions as generally acknowledged all the books of our New Testament except James, Jude, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, which were disputed by some, but recognised by the majority. Athanasius in 367 lays down the twenty-seven books of our New Testament as alone canonical; shortly afterwards Jerome and Augustine followed his example in the West. The process farther east took a little longer; it was not until c. 508 that 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude and Revelation were included in a version of the Syriac Bible in addition to the other twenty two books.

CANONS

Marcion was the first to set a Canon around 140. He did not believe in the OT and taught the OT God was inferior to Christ. His Canon included ten of the Pauline epistles (without the Pastorals) and Luke's Gospel. He edited these books, purging them of what did not accord with his views.

(ii) Irenaeus (ca.130-200), whose writings are contemporary with the Muratorian list, presents the same picture. His evidence is significant in that he was a rather ecumenical figure in his day. He spent his earlier life in Asia Minor and his later life in Gaul. He was also in close touch with Rome. He does not seem to have had Hebrews in his canon, and there is some uncertainty as to whether he accepted the general epistles (except 1 Peter, 1 and 2 John). He refers to the *Shepherd of Hermas* as "scripture" but does not include it in the list of apostolic writings.

(iii) Tertullian (ca.160-220) is our authority for Africa. He appears to have had 22 books in his canon — the four Gospels, Acts, the thirteen epistles of Paul, 1 Peter, 1 John, Jude and Revelation. He did not treat Hebrews as canonical.

(iv) Origen (ca.185-254) in the East has a good deal to say about the canon. According to F.F. Bruce, "He acknowledged the four canonical Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, the Pauline epistles and Hebrews, 1 Peter, 1 John and Revelation as 'undisputed' books." ²⁴ Origen does acknowledge, however, that Hebrews, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, James and Jude were rejected by some.

4. By the year 220 the status of the various writings of the New Testament are broadly as follows:
5. (i) The Gospels: They are one of the best attested sections of the New Testament during this period. In contrast to Marcion's one Gospel (Luke) and the Gnostics' *Gospel of Truth*, Irenaeus maintains that the Church recognizes four Gospels. There need to be four Gospels, he says, because there are four parts of the world and four winds (a rather quaint *a posteriori* argument!).
6. (ii) Acts: By this time it is acknowledged as the work of Luke. It has a secure position between the Gospels and the letters of Paul.
7. (iii) Paul: All thirteen letters are universally received and accepted. The unity of the Pauline material was recognized.
8. (iv) Hebrews: There is a sharp difference in the Church at this time concerning its canonicity. The Eastern Church which was strongly influenced by the Alexandrian theologians, Clement and Origen, readily accepted it as a letter of Paul. In the Western Church it was not accorded canonical status till late in the fourth century. This was

because Pauline authorship of this epistle had at an early stage been denied in the West. Non-apostolic authorship was a dogmatic consideration.

9. (v) The Catholic Epistles have various positions of security at this time: James is an epistle over which there is again a sharp division of opinion. In the Eastern Church it is one of the books accepted without question, although in some circles as late as 325 it is regarded as a forgery. 1 Peter has a firm place in the canon. (Its omission from the Muratorian Canon was probably a scribal accident). The opposite is true for 2 Peter. Its history is very uncertain. Some believe the Muratorian Canon rejects 2 Peter. Others identify it with the Apocalypse of Peter (see above). There is no evidence of its canonicity before 350. It was rejected by the Syrian Church till the fifth century. It is difficult to determine the grounds for uncertainty. There is nothing of the modern trend to play off its theology against that of 1 Peter. 1 John was generally received. From a historical perspective 2 and 3 John have an uncertain position. Only by the fourth century are they received as canonical. It has been suggested that at this time all three letters were called "The Epistles of John." Because of their brevity, 2 and 3 John may have circulated with 1 John. The Muratorian Canon refers to two epistles of John. Jude is accepted in the Muratorian Canon and appealed to by Clement, Tertullian and Origen. However, it is not universally accepted. Around 360 it is not part of the canon in the Syrian and African Churches.
10. (vi) Revelation has quite a secure position at this time, although there is still some opposition. Irenaeus, Clement and Tertullian refer to it as "The Apocalypse" although the spurious *Apocalypse of Peter* was also circulating at the time. Of the latter the Muratorian Canon notes that "some of our people refuse to have it read in the Church."
11. (vii) Other Writings: Tertullian, Irenaeus and Clement cite the *Shepherd of Hermas* as Scripture. However, after 200 a series of ecclesiastical decisions began to loosen the bond between *The Shepherd* and other books. It is done rather mildly — it is to be read privately and for edification, but not to be read publicly with the prophets and the apostles. This attitude is already expressed in the Muratorian Canon which states: ".... it should be read, indeed, but it cannot be published to the people in Church either along with the prophets, whose number is complete, or with the apostles of these last days." ²⁵ This seems to be an attempt to develop a deutero-canon. This attitude, however, seals the fate of *The Shepherd*.
12. The letters of Clement of Rome, especially 1 Clement (95 AD), were used in worship services, particularly in Corinth. However, 1 Clement never enjoyed widespread canonical recognition. The Apocalypse of Peter, the Didache, and the Acts of Paul (Latin) were other such documents. They were accepted for a time in limited circles, but eventually were excluded by all.

